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ACTA

THE INFLUENCE OF SPECIALIZED TRAINING ON THE QUALITY OF HOTEL CUSTOMERS SERVICE

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Abstract. The aim of the study was to identify the changes that have occurred in the quality of hotel services in the past 10 years in the area of eastern Poland. Efforts were made to determine the effect of trainings in managing customer satisfaction on the level of contentment of hotel visitors. The study was conducted in 50 hotels in eastern Poland in 2004 and 2014 using the Servqual method. It was shown that the specialised trainings of the hotel staff are an essential determinant of improvement of the quality and competitiveness of Polish hotels. The quality of customer service, particularly functional quality, increases thanks to the trainings. Hotels located in eastern Poland need to continue to improve their quality, especially in tangibles, reliability and confidence areas. The supporting infrastructure in hotels, transportation accessibility of facilities, speed and reliability of customer service should be extended, proper management of relationships in the supply chain services should be ensured and visitors should be provided with a broadly-understood safety. Data was analyzed using Statistica 10 PL and Servqual method.

Key words: consumer research, customer, relationship, servqual, training for manager

INTRODUCTION

Quality in the hotel industry has become an essential factor distinguishing hotels among competitors [Pendergast 2006]. High quality of service, and particularly maintaining it at a high level is a difficult task, especially in the Polish, dynamically changing market [Mey et al. 2006].

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The emerging new hotels offer customers a wide range of services. This is the reason that it becomes increasingly difficult for them to gain a competitive advantage in the market by using familiar marketing tools [Hoecht 2006, Petrick 2013]. Therefore, it has become necessary to focus on monitoring the level of customer satisfaction, which is the most important link in the process of service provision [Jang et al. 2009]. Observation and constant dialogue with customers allows to explore their expectations and fulfill their needs and requirements [Akababa 2006].

Quality is a concept of subjective nature, it refers to the characteristics of the object or service that distinguish them and decide on their uniqueness [Spielmann and Larocheb et al. 2012]. It is also the degree to which the product is beneficial to the potential buyer [Kimes and Robson 2004]. Quality is the ability to meet the external and internal needs and expectations of customers, which should take into account the technical and functional elements [Martin 2006]. In the market economy, where supply exceeds demand, the customer always chooses a supplier who offers him a wider range of services and provides greater satisfaction [Brilman 2002].

Technical quality stems from the physical dimension of service and is dependent on the solutions applied in the management of the hotel, both technical and systemic. Functional quality, meanwhile, is based on how the service was provided, which means that it is associated with communicativeness, conduct of employees, willingness and ability to provide the service. Functional quality is more important than technical quality and its level determines whether the tourist company will gain the client permanently or will have contact with him only for a limited time. It is definitely easier to manage tangibles than the sphere of service, i.e. human skills [Davison 1994].

The concept of TQM (total quality management) applies in the hotel industry, and is based on a comprehensive management of quality, the aim of which is its increase, while reducing costs, which in a longer perspective allows to increase competitiveness [Zopiatis and Theocharous 2013]. Introducing TQM requires the involvement of all employees [Shani and Uriely et al. 2014], mass trainings in the field of quality and marketing orientation focused on the customer. It is important to introduce appropriate programs, techniques and quality tools, which main objective will be customer satisfaction and improvement of the quality of service [Kachniewska 2002]. Quality management in the hotel industry remains the current area of interest of researchers [Ahmad 2013].

The concept of TQM, widely used in business, has been implemented in hotel enterprises as a way of monitoring the quality [Becket and Brookes 2008]. Such orientation provides systematic feedback from the customer, allowing managers directing the hotel to pay attention to the level of quality of the service offered [Badri et al. 2006, Lam and Chen 2012].

Marketing literature constantly emphasizes the importance of relational aspects in commercial transactions and recommends the continued development of mutually beneficial relationships with customers [Crosby et al. 1990]. Such an approach should increase the repeatability of customer purchases and be profitable [Ok et al. 2005]. In hotel enterprises, intangibility and inseparability of production from consumption have a unique character, which means that consumer confidence in the company plays a large role [Bendapudi and Berry 1997]. It is the basis for long-term relationships between the hotel company and the client [Frederick and Schefter 2000].

Customer orientation implies a strict measurement of customer satisfaction [Ariffin et al. 2011]. In the case of any signs of reduced quality, customers start to consider re-signing from the services, and among the first are the best customers [Ariffin 2013]. It is of great importance in tourism, because this is about the leisure time, the value of which increases with the income of buyers [Mudie and Cottam 1998].

When it comes to measuring the level of quality, particularly in the service sector, the problem of research objectivity occurs, as a particular service for one person has a high quality, while for another does not meet the assumed standards [Jang-Hyeo and Timothy 2011]. Therefore, quality should be defined as meeting the requirements of the client, and not as a definition of technical parameters, which in the case of services is very difficult to separate [Mong-Yuan et al. 2013].

The Servqual method, which is ready and universal standard of service quality [Teas 1993], is a frequently used tool to measure the quality of services [Dagger and Sweeney 2006, Zeithaml et al. 2009]. The method allows the evaluation of services, with additional assessment of the quality from the standpoint of the person providing the service [Lee and Hing 1995].

The analysis of the quality of services is intended to identify these elements of the process of providing the services that affect customer dissatisfaction [Badri et al. 2006] and sometimes effectively discourage the purchase of hotel services [Smith 2013]. Hotel staff is often not aware of the mistakes they make, and only through research areas can be identified that reduce the level of service provision [Jang et al. 2009].

The aim of the article was to identify the changes that have occurred in the quality of hotel services in the past 10 years in the region of eastern Poland. This is the period between the accession of Poland to the European Union, and the present time. The study also sought to determine the impact of trainings in managing customer satisfaction on the level of satisfaction of hotel visitors. Through the use of the Servqual method it was attempted to assess the relevance of the individual dimensions in the evaluation of service by respondents.

METHODS

The first measurements were made in 2004, the year of Poland accession to the European Union. Subsequent surveys were carried out in 2014, i.e. after 10 years of Poland in the European structures. Prior to the surveys in 2004, 50 hotels were randomly selected, located in eastern Poland, i.e. in provinces with the lowest GDP per capita in the whole EU.

When selecting hotels to the experimental sample, the confidence level was set at 0.95, the estimated fraction size was determined at 0.50, and the maximum error was set at 0.05. All hotels had standard of at least three stars and Polish capital. In these hotels, surveys of 1,121 foreign guests were carried out on the principle of respondent availability. The analysis included 1,040 correctly filled out questionnaires.

In 2014, the study was repeated in the same hotels as in 2004. Hotels were further divided into two groups. One comprised those where employees have not gone through the trainings. In them, 978 properly completed surveys by foreign guests were collected. The second group consisted of hotels, in which employees and/or managers have undergone

trainings in customer service (minimum three employees participated in 60-hour specialized training). In these hotels, also 978 correctly filled questionnaires were collected.

The study used the Servqual method with a specially designed questionnaire consisting of two parts, 22 questions each. The Servqual method is aimed to indicate differences between the perceived quality of service and the quality provided by a particular company [Ladhari 2009], which allows to estimate the degree of customer satisfaction with the services provided [Juwaheer 2006]. Evaluation is carried out on the basis of five dimensions distinguished in service quality: tangibles (I), reliability (II), liability of suppliers (III), confidence (IV) and affordability (V). Considering individual dimensions, tables were designed in the third part of the survey, which was intended to weigh the tested dimensions [Berry and Parasuraman 1991].

Based on the unweighted Servqual results, one can decide which of the elements of the service provided should be further analyzed in order to achieve its most optimal level of quality. The calculated unweighted Servqual result can have positive, negative or zero value. A positive result means obtaining better quality/satisfaction than the customer expected; a negative result indicates a failure to meet expectations. The most optimal situation is when the result is zero, which means that the service exactly meets customer expectations.

The weighted Servqual index is acquired in the third part of the survey, in which respondents weigh particular areas and non-weighted Servqual indices.

Statistica 10.1 PL software was used in statistical analyses. The analysis of descriptive statistics and Student's t-test were applied. Prior to the analysis, multivariate normality was examine, testing each variable for normal distribution. Slight deviations were omitted, due to the number of variables in each group. Means were considered statistically significant differences at the probability less than p <0.05.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

The results showed that in 2004 the largest gap occurred between the expectations of guests and observations in the area of employee reactions to their needs (responsiveness). The problem concerned the sphere of skills of helping guests, counseling and meeting their wishes. A large gap was also observed in the area of empathy, which indicated a low level of performance of the hotel staff from the point of view of meeting the needs of guests. This particularly applied to a problem of making contact with the customer and individual treatment.

Comparing ex ante evaluations of the subjects in subsequent years, it was demonstrated that the expectations slightly increased in both hotels which trained employees and those in which such trainings were not used. Comparison of ex post evaluations indicated that the management of the surveyed companies benefited from the research conducted in 2004 and implemented corrective and remedial actions.

Quality of service was much better evaluated by guests in hotels, where employees participated in trainings in customer service. Most significantly improved the dimension of empathy, as its gap increased from a negative value to a positive value, and responsiveness dimension, which showed a similar trend.

The differences between the ex ante and ex post assessments in hotels, where employees did not undergo trainings were lower in 2014 than in 2004. Quality evaluation was worse in them than in hotels, where employees received specialised training (Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in expectations (ex ante) and perceptions (ex post) of foreign customers in the quality of hotel services and differences in the particular values expressed as absolute values in 2004 and 2014

Dimension/Area	2004			2014					
				Hotels where employees did not undergo trainings			Hotels where employees underwent trainings		
	ex ante	ex post	diffe-rence	ex ante	ex post	diffe-rence	ex ante	ex post	diffe-rence
Tangibility (I)	4.157	3.661	−0.496	4.197	3.992	−0.205	4.187	4.063	−0.124
Reliability (II)	4.448	3.852	−0.596	4.475	4.379	−0.096	4.488	4.464	−0.024
Responsiveness (III)	4.305	2.841	−1.464	4.322	3.960	−0.362	4.347	4.401	0.054
Confidence (IV)	4.323	3.645	−0.678	4.156	3.949	−0.207	4.558	4.508	−0.050
Empathy (V)	3.954	2.598	−1.356	4.243	3.866	−0.377	4.304	4.391	0.087
Average	**4.237**	**3.319**	**−0.918**	**4.279**	**4.029**	**−0.249**	**4.377**	**4.365**	**−0.011**

Source: Based on the study results.

The Servqual analysis also allowed to assess the relevance of the individual dimensions in the evaluation of the service investigated. It was shown that consumer preferences have changed over the years. The characteristics, which were desirable in 2004, as reliability and confidence, depreciated in 2014. This could be a result of globalisation, as well as solicitude of companies operating in the market with a high degree of competitiveness, which increased the standard of service in order to remain on the market. Invariably, the reaction of staff to their needs and expectations was important for customers. Weighs of dimensions concerning tangibles of the service and empathy were inversely shaped. The possibilities that common Europe brings, the flow of knowledge, capital and an increase of visa-free transfer of tourists have significantly raised the level of hotel's decor (Fig. 1).

It was shown that the hotel management should be interested to the greatest extent in the result of the weighted Servqual score, because this indicator shows the impact of each individual dimension on the final result of the service provided. Evaluation of the quality of hotel services has increased in every dimension over the 10 years surveyed. Assessment of the quality in the hotels, where employees has received specialised training was significantly better. However, evaluation perceived was higher than expected for the third dimension, which concerned workers' responsiveness to guests' needs. The fifth dimension, referring to personnel empathy, also received a positive score. However, it applied only to the hotels that trained employees in customer service. Acquiring a positive average Servqual index jointly for five dimensions, ensures owners of hotel facilities that success can be achieved by conducting systematic monitoring of customer feedback pertaining to the service standards, and by introducing immediate corrective and remedial actions (Fig. 2).
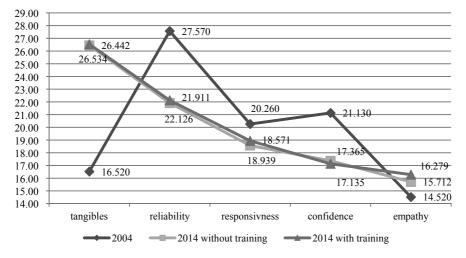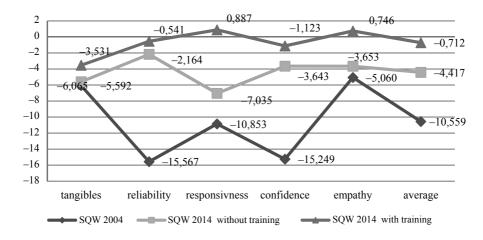
Fig. 1.   Criteria of relevance – the average results of Servqual dimension weighs in the studied
           years
Source: Based on the study results.

Fig. 2.   Servqual weighted index (*SQW*) for hotel services in 2004 and 2014
Source: Based on the study results.

Comparisons of the Servqual index for five dimensions were carried out in hotels that trained employees and those, in which such trainings were not conducted. In all instances, significant differences were demonstrated in the evaluated dimensions at $p < 0.05$. In all instances, hotels that conducted staff trainings achieved higher values in individual dimensions (Table 2).

Table 2.   t-Test for weighted Servqual for two groups of hotels in particular areas

Dimension/Area	t-Test	p-Value
Tangibility (I)	−2.0814	0.037[a]
Reliability (II)	−2.5879	0.009[a]
Responsiveness (III)	−9.0754	0.001[a]
Confidence (IV)	−3.7112	0.001[a]
Empathy (V)	−6.3969	0.001[a]

[a] significant difference at $p < 0.05$.

Source: Based on the study results.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The objectives assumed have been achieved. The validity of systematic monitoring of the quality of hotel services have been confirmed. Earlier studies have indicated that continuous monitoring of services had an impact on the formation of high standards of hotel guest service [Otto et al. 1996]. The consequence of this procedure was an increased level of customer satisfaction with staying in the hotel as well as the prospect of future visits [Phillips et al. 1983].

Research conducted by Fiorentino [1995] indicated that currently bed and breakfast only is not sufficient for hotel guests. Expectations are directed towards comprehensive services, particularly concerning safety in hotel facilities.

The study confirmed the need, and at the same time demonstrated, that conducting staff trainings raises the level of services that hotel enterprise is able to provide. This is undoubtedly associated with the need to know and apply the vision and mission by each employee, because it enhances, engages and motivates to increase the efficiency and quality of service. Such actions have a direct impact on attracting hotel guests as well as their return visits. Organisational culture is also aimed at producing a good first impression on hotel guests [Manhas and Tukamushaba 2015].

It is claimed that each employee is a service provider and an internal client, who issues opinions about the hotel on the external market [Boshoff and Mels 1995]. Frederick and Mukesh [2001] also pointed out that employees are internal customers of the hotel, and their attitudes affect the external customer satisfaction. To encourage staff to engage in work, one must take actions to motivate employees. Training directors and hotel managers in the team management and personal communication gain great importance in such an approach. Patiar and Mia [2009], Lee [2011] found that the leadership also has a positive effect on employee behavior and motivates to mutual assistance. In addition, the study of MacKenzie [2001] demonstrated that leadership and training have a positive impact on improving employee performance and development of organizational culture of the hotel, and these factors have a direct influence on the quality of customer service.

The studies conducted in hotels in eastern Poland confirmed the results of earlier works. They showed that the hotels where the staff received specialised training in customer service evidently improved the quality, especially the functional one in the soft skills of staff, in the responsiveness and empathy dimensions.

The quality of guest service was also affected by the dimension of tangibility, which includes: the attractiveness of the hotel rooms, transport accessibility, modern furnishing, as well as the dimension of reliability, which consists of, among others, quality of food, cleanliness, reliability and neatness of staff [Wuest et al. 1996]. These dimensions in the study still had a negative gap, i.e. hotel guests expected more than they received from the hotel. This problem should be solved through improved coordination and integration with contractors and business partners who are a complementary sphere of hotel service activities. Therefore, skillful management of relationships between hotels and their suppliers is such an important issue [Murphy and Smith 2009, Zhang et al. 2009, Fantazy et al. 2010, Ku et al. 2011, Wang et al. 2013]. In order to provide high-quality raw materials and semi-finished food, hotel restaurants should cooperate with their suppliers [Akbaba 2006] as well as ensure the provision of high quality table cloths, cleaning products or the dishes and cutlery [Smith and Xiao 2008, Fantazy et al. 2010, Pullman and Rodgers 2010, Song 2011]. The joint teamwork effectively facilitates the relationships in supply chain services, because testing the quality of contractors is also important [Ganesan 1994, Mentzer et al. 2000, Ferguson et al. 2005].

Studies have confirmed the validity of the Servqual analysis in estimating the quality of the services offered by the hotel companies. This is an excellent method especially in detecting and correcting deficiencies or errors in service. It is popular not only among researchers from Eastern Europe. Similar studies were conducted in Asia (Japan and Taiwan) by Mok and Armstrong [1998], by Weiermair [2003], in the mountainous regions of Austria and by Douglas and Connor [2003] in Northern Ireland.

It has been proven that there are no ideal research tools in the social sciences. Gabbie et al. [1997] and Williams [1998] and O'Neill et al. [2001] who previously were among critics of Servqual tool are using it. One of the charges against the method was its general character, since it applies in psychology, economics and other social sciences. The creators of the method [Parasuraman and Zeithaml et al. 1985, 1991] suggested that the tool should be adapted directly to the tested branch of the service sector. Carman [1990], Pitt [1997] and Williams [1998] proposed generic model that can be used in many industries.

Despite the opinion of critics Servqual model is a useful method. Testing the quality of services is difficult to measure because of its subjective nature.

With the need to implement management approaches pursued by management, which is to achieve customer satisfaction, and gaining its loyalty – measurement of the quality of service it is necessary.

Berry et al. [2004] proposed universal tool which, after small modifications can be used in any service industry, no matter whether it's financial services, banking or hospitality. The tool is so versatile that it allows to compare the quality of service regardless of the area of research. The only limitation of this method is that you can not make comparisons between different industries and countries with different organizational culture.

Great importance in quality management has the focus on the client in order to provide services at the level expected and ensuring the customer that he also has influence on the service, by issuing its opinion. Advocates of the method Servqual who has use it to investigate the expectations of customers in the hospitality sector, Carman [1990], Barbakus and Boller [1992] found that the method is good and reliable. In carrying out

the study at different times they came to similar conclusions, that the most important in hospitality is: assurances, reliability and tangibles.

The authors of this study conducted a statistical analysis in five respondents dimensions. They reaffirmed the significance of differences, and also checked the adequacy of the application of the method Servqual on the market of hotel services in Poland. The results obtained are similar to the results obtained by other researchers in Northern Ireland and Austria.

This assessment and interpretation of study results allows to evaluate the Servqual method as very useful, and at the same time proper in attempting to verify and assess the level of service provided by hotel companies.

Theoretical conclusions:

1. Accession of Poland to the EU has contributed to improving the quality of hotel services in eastern Poland. Years 2004–2010 were primarily the period of high investments in this sector. Market growth, and particularly its quality, was accomplished not only by opening new hotels, but through the expansion and modernization of existing facilities.
2. Quality of service is fundamental to the operation of the hotel business. Guest decision of choosing a hotel and satisfaction with the service is dependent on its level.
3. Measuring the quality of services with the Servqual method help detect and correct any deficiencies in the service. It allows to meet the expectations of potential customers and adjust the level of service to market requirements.

Practical conclusions:

1. Specialised training of the hotel staff are an essential determinant of improvement of the quality and competitiveness of Polish hotels. The quality of customer service, particularly functional quality, increases thanks to the trainings.
2. Hotels located in eastern Poland need to continue to improve their quality, especially in tangibles, reliability and confidence areas. The supporting infrastructure in hotels, accessibility of facilities, speed and reliability of customer service should be extended, proper management of relationships in the supply chain services should be ensured and visitors should be provided with a broadly-understood safety.

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WPŁYW SPECJALISTYCZNYCH SZKOLEŃ NA JAKOŚĆ OBSŁUGI KLIENTÓW HOTELOWYCH

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu było wskazanie zmian, które dokonały się w jakości usług hotelarskich na przestrzeni ostatnich 10 lat na terenach wschodniej Polski. Starano się określić wpływ prowadzonych szkoleń z zakresu zarządzania satysfakcją klienta na poziom zadowolenia odwiedzających hotele. Badania przeprowadzono w 50 hotelach wschodniej Polski metodą Servqual w latach 2004 i 2014. Wykazano, iż specjalistyczne szkolenia kadry hotelowej są niezbędnym wyznacznikiem poprawy jakości oraz konkurencyjności polskich hoteli. Dzięki szkoleniom wzrasta jakość obsługi klienta, zwłaszcza jakość funkcjonalna. Hotele zlokalizowane we wschodniej Polsce nadal muszą poprawiać swoją jakość, szczególnie w obszarach materialnych, wiarygodności i zaufania. Należy rozszerzać

infrastrukturę towarzyszącą w hotelach, dostępność komunikacyjną obiektów, szybkość i niezawodność obsługi gości, zadbać o prawidłowe zarządzanie relacjami w łańcuchach dostaw usług oraz zapewnić gościom szeroko rozumiane bezpieczeństwo. Dane były analizowane za pomocą programu Statistica 10 PL i metody Servqual.

Słowa kluczowe: badania zachowań konsumentów, konsument, relacje metody Servqual, specjalistyczne szkolenie menedżerskie